



## From the Top Down: Engaging School Leaders in Creating a Healthier, More Physically Active School Environment

Without commitment at the top, in the form of buy-in by superintendents, administrators, and principals, Action for Healthy Kids contends that any school wellness initiative is destined to be less successful, and lasting, than it might otherwise be. But how do you access, interest, excite, and engage district and school leaders such as principals and superintendents? With persistence and ingenuity, Action for Healthy Kids Teams are finding ways. By sitting down with school leaders face-to-face, on their own turf. By clarifying goals and then aggressively recruiting school leaders as active players. By streamlining and suggesting appropriate and easily implementable-from-the-top solutions. By making school leadership intrinsic to the initiative at hand. By helping administrators recognize the bottom-line academic value of such initiatives. And by acknowledging, rewarding, and celebrating – in a way that’s visible to the community at large – the inevitable successes.

Perhaps the biggest challenge in getting school leaders – superintendents, principals, school committee and school board members, and other administrators – involved in creating healthier school environments for kids is simply getting on the radar screens of these always-busy, invariably over-worked individuals. But without the serious buy-in and genuine involvement of school leaders at the very top, the reality is that concerned parents, enthusiastic students, and committed activists can accomplish only so much.

This is the story of three Action for Healthy Kids Teams – Rhode Island, West Virginia, and Indiana – that devised innovative ways to get to, communicate with, and “recruit” school leaders in the fight against childhood obesity. While the three Teams’ approaches differ, each had the same goal: convincing influential school leaders of the importance of the mission, and then making those same leaders active players in the game.

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### Rhode Island

#### **Not Just a Meal. An Agenda.**

**Dorothy Brayley is the Chair of the Rhode Island Action for Healthy Kids Team,** which is known locally in the Ocean State as the Rhode Island Healthy Schools Coalition. The Rhode Island Team’s tool for “getting to the top” was the creation and rollout of what came to be known as the “Lunch & Learn”

**RHODE ISLAND'S  
"LUNCH & LEARN"  
IN A NUTSHELL**

- On-site lunchtime meetings convened with district leaders – in their offices.
- School leaders gained new information, became more educated, got a chance to discuss the wellness issue, and eat a healthy, free lunch.
- Rhode Island Team members achieved their goal of agreement to form a district wellness committee, with leadership support from the top.

program – a series of on-site, high-level lunches hosted in each school district. These lunch sessions were structured as a way for district leaders – in the course of an hour, and over a healthful catered lunch served conveniently in their offices – to get educated about the whole issue of the vital and growing importance of healthy eating and physical activity in the school environment. Brayley describes the genesis of her Team's program:

"We originally started Lunch & Learn as a result, frankly, of years of trying in vain, in more mundane ways, to reach administrators about the school wellness issue. In struggling to build strong teams of committed members, we learned time and time again that, frustratingly, we could go only so far without the full involvement, sanctioning, and influence of top leadership to help move things forward. It was so maddening. In trying to get them on the team, we'd schedule a presentation to district administrators, and often they'd get busy on the day of the meeting and then would not show up. And of course then we'd fall off their radar screen until we tracked them down again, weeks or months later. It wasn't that they were uninterested in the subject, or uncaring, but with all their other, sometimes more urgent, priorities, we were frequently pushed to the back burner."

**The Answer: Focused, One-Hour,  
On-Premises Sit-Downs at Lunchtime**

Brayley says that Lunch & Learn was the solution – a way to really focus the attention of district leaders in a concentrated, one-hour, mid-day session. The Rhode Island Team would plan a simple menu, and would then go on-site for the lunch event – hosting the meal/meeting sometimes in a school district headquarters conference room, and occasionally right in a senior administrator's or superintendent's office. Invitations offering the Lunch & Learn session were sent out to districts statewide, stressing that lunch was the Rhode Island Team's "treat," and, more important, that it represented an opportunity for district leaders to learn more about a crucial topic – a topic growing more crucial yearly.

"You'd be surprised what a successful motivator a complimentary, nicely catered, in-office lunch for as many as 10 or 12 busy people turned out to be," Brayley notes, amused. "We'd involve food service in creating the lunch, which we thought was a smart way to bring them into the loop. And we had a very definite structure for the meeting in terms of attendance – these weren't just random, casual drop-ins. Each district that agreed to have us in for lunch had to commit to delivering certain decision-making people around the table – namely, the district superintendent, at least one school board or school committee member, the district's business manager, ideally the district's food service director, at least one actively involved parent leader, one articulate student leader, and, lastly, appropriate administrative staff, which we left to the discretion of the district."

Dorothy Brayley describes a typical meeting.

"As everyone enjoyed his or her lunch, I, or another trained Rhode Island Team member, would typically do a 15- to 20-minute presentation in which I gave an overview of the issue, touching on the importance of better nutrition and more physical activity in school; how those two things have

**THE LEARNING CONNECTION:  
THE VALUE OF IMPROVING  
NUTRITION AND PHYSICAL  
ACTIVITY IN OUR SCHOOLS**

**An Action for Healthy Kids Report**

*The Learning Connection*, a ground-breaking report from Action for Healthy Kids, documents how the excessive rise in poor nutrition, inactivity, and weight problems is adversely affecting academic achievement among students and possibly costing schools millions of dollars each year. The report calls on schools to work with partners to take immediate action to address the issue, and points to current best practices in schools, school districts, and states.

While *The Learning Connection* cautions that more research is needed to understand the link between poor nutrition, physical inactivity and academic achievement, it makes a strong case that these factors have an adverse effect on academic performance.

The report points out that it is in schools' own best interest to improve the nutrition and physical activity environments – and that there are community partners willing to collaborate to help find and implement practical solutions.

A downloadable copy of *The Learning Connection* is available on the Action for Healthy Kids website, [www.ActionForHealthyKids.org](http://www.ActionForHealthyKids.org).

been inextricably linked to improved academic performance; and then closing with a look at what tools are available to help the district under discussion get on the nutrition and physical activity bandwagon.”

Brayley points out that, in her presentations, she would often highlight individuals in the district who were already actively working with the Rhode Island Team on the classroom level – and that, sometimes in such instances, the superintendent and other senior administrators were completely unaware of it. This surprised Brayley, and made her realize how often the organizational systems can keep education administrators from being as cognizant as they might be of what’s going on on a grassroots level in their schools, at least when it comes to wellness topics.

## **Not Just Chit-Chat. Closure.**

The remainder of a typical Rhode Island Lunch & Learn session was devoted to facilitating dialogue. But Brayley stresses that this wasn’t just a feel-good “talk” session.

“Our hard-and-fast goal for an outcome of each of these sessions was the formation of a wellness committee. That was what we were proposing, our ‘call to action’ – and remember this was before the federal school wellness mandate\* required districts to involve a broad group of individuals in the wellness policy process. Our dream scenario was that the superintendent and/or the school board member present would respond to our presentation by saying, ‘Okay, we get it – we’re going to form a wellness and physical activity committee immediately.’ When they did, that was when we knew we’d broken through and that we’d begun to create a top-down dynamic within the district.” How so?

“Because,” Brayley contends, “once a superintendent or a school board empowers a committee with solid leadership support, you know you’ve suddenly got movers and shakers taking part, and that you’ve got the potential for real progress happening. So we went into Lunch & Learns knowing that that was our ‘closure.’ That was the desired outcome, the hoped-for action. It was never just, ‘Let’s sit down to lunch and talk about things.’”

The proof of the Rhode Island Team’s success at Lunch & Learn was not simply that they ended up getting nearly 70% of the districts they met with to form wellness committees as standard subcommittees of local school boards. An even greater accomplishment was that the establishment of such subcommittees by school districts was subsequently mandated by law in the state of Rhode Island; that legislation was introduced by state lawmakers, passed by the General Assembly, and signed by Governor Donald Carcieri, all in a single legislative session – again, well before the federal school wellness policy mandate was issued.

\*The Federal Child Nutrition and Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Reauthorization Act of 2004 requires that any school district participating in a federal nutrition program adopt a policy on student wellness. According to the requirements for the local wellness policy, school districts must set goals for nutrition education, physical activity, campus food provision and other school-based activities designed to promote student wellness. Additionally, districts are required to involve a broad group of individuals in policy development and to have a plan for measuring policy implementation.

## Genuine – and Genuinely Satisfying – Progress

Melissa Campbell is Dorothy Brayley's colleague on Rhode Island's Team. She stresses that, in Lunch & Learn sessions, the principal message was "the academic sell" of good nutrition and increased physical activity. Why? Because classroom achievement was – and remains – the bottom line for principals and superintendents.

"Four years ago when we started doing Lunch & Learns," Campbell recalls, "there wasn't the wealth of data supporting an academic or 'learning' rationale for putting healthier school environments in place. Extensive studies hadn't been done to any great degree – but we did have some compelling statistics from early studies, particularly those conducted in California, that made it irrefutable that you could draw a straight cause-and-effect line from nutrition and increased physical activity to higher academic achievement. And those early studies became very much the sum and substance of our lunchtime presentations. In the end, the academic-achievement argument – showing administrators 'the science behind wellness,' if you will – was what always ended up tipping the scales, and getting signoff from principals and superintendents to establish a wellness committee to pursue the subject further."

Campbell notes that there was never any doubt in her mind that principals and superintendents care, and care deeply, about students' health and wellness for its own sake. But it was, and is today, wellness's link to academic achievement that leads to action on their part – that gets administrators, as Campbell puts it, "off the fence."

So have things changed, now that the kinds of wellness councils and committees envisioned as the outcome of Rhode Island's Lunch & Learn gatherings have been federally mandated?

"Absolutely," asserts Campbell. "With that federal mandate in place, school districts' needs are very different. They don't need to be convinced of the value or worth of wellness councils anymore – as we all know, districts have to establish them by law. Now, however, what districts, and sometimes individual schools, need is assistance in drafting these policies – and then in refining them, enforcing them, modifying them to special district circumstances. And sometimes even in integrating them into a district's overall strategic plan. That is now the focus of much of our work. Lunch & Learns were amazingly effective at convincing those at the top of the urgency of the situation, and of their need to act, vis-a-vis school wellness. Now, though, our role is one of consulting and guiding, not convincing. The convincing part is done."

Dorothy Brayley agrees. Summing up, she stresses once again that district leaders have so much on their plates that simply getting them to sit down and listen is often 90% of the challenge. She also reminds us that, several years ago, when Rhode Island's Lunch & Learn sessions were begun, there wasn't nearly the awareness that there is today – thanks largely to Action for Healthy Kids – about the problem of poor nutrition and lack of physical activity in schools.

"It's humbling, looking back. Many superintendents and administrators at that time were only vaguely aware of the wellness challenges in our

schools,” Brayley says, “and some, in fact, weren’t aware at all. You simply didn’t have the coverage of the topic in the media at that time, the awareness among parents and lay people of the evils of junk food, and the articles about the topic in professional journals, that you have today. We’ve come a long way in a few years.”

Brayley and her Team can certainly claim credit for a good deal of the progress in Rhode Island.

## West Virginia

**Kathy Talley is the Coordinator of West Virginia’s Office of Child Nutrition**, and an active member of the West Virginia Action for Healthy Kids Team. In her state, a recent effort to enlist school leadership focused on principals. Why?

“At the end of the day, the principal sets the tone in a school building,” Talley bottom-lines. “Yes, superintendents are obviously in charge. But here’s how we look at it. If an individual school building were a company or corporation, the principal would be the CEO, the top of the management structure. While classroom teachers may be powerful and influential, they take their cues from the principal. Research shows time and again that a strong, involved school principal results in a strong school, with everything that goes along with that – improved test scores, better discipline, a high level of community involvement, enthusiastic parents – it all starts at the top. Also, when it comes to the nuts and bolts of nutrition and physical activity in a school, the principal has jurisdiction in the building. He or she can dictate everything from what snacks get served at school pep rallies to when and how policies established by the state, or the district, get implemented in the cafeteria. In our view, the school principal is the absolute linchpin in his or her building, the most important piece of the puzzle.”

Considering this perspective, it’s small wonder that the West Virginia Team devised and structured an entire awareness and action campaign aimed at, and based on, principal involvement.

### A Streamlined Resource.

It all began when the Superintendent of Schools for the state of West Virginia challenged the Team, and other groups in the state, to find a new way to engage school leadership in the nutrition and physical activity issue.

“We were painfully aware,” Kathy Talley explains, “that the biggest obstacle in speaking to school leaders is time. They just don’t have any to spare, in this age of No Child Left Behind requirements and other demands that seem to fill every minute of both administrators’ and students’ days with test-taking and preparation. Sometimes, it seems that buy-in and implementation is comparatively easy, once you get an issue in front of school leaders – but the hard part is just getting to them!”

To engage principals, Talley’s Team made the conscious decision not to create a time-intensive resource – eschewing yet another dust-collecting book or binder, in favor of a slick, digital resource: in conjunction with West Virginia’s Department of Education, they developed a streamlined CD that, on a single disc tailored in tone and content directly to busy principals, consolidated a wide array of simple, easily implemented solutions and



**WEST VIRGINIA'S  
"RECIPE FOR SUCCESS" CD  
IN A NUTSHELL**

- Designed especially for school principals.
- Produced by the West Virginia Dept. of Education in conjunction with West Virginia Action for Healthy Kids Team.
- A resource for helping schools to:
  1. Create school environments that teach and model healthful eating and physical activity; and
  2. Improve students' chances for academic success and good health.
- Narrated by West Virginia Principal of the Year.
- Recognized principal's role as leader in shaping school environment.
- Sensitive to principals' concerns: not another mandate or program; easily adaptable to individual school situations; drew on existing resources.
- Content of CD menu-driven, with numerous internet links, assessment tools, a variety of strategies.
- Covered school breakfasts, physical activity, physical education, food for snacks and parties, and other wellness-related topics.
- Included wellness-based lesson plans and classroom strategies.

tools for creating a healthy school environment. Things that, in Talley's words – and sounding very much like Dorothy Brayley in describing Rhode Island's Lunch & Learn sessions – would make a principal say, "Okay. I'm in. I understand the importance of this, and I see how to do it. Let's make it happen here."

To boost the CD's appeal to principals, its creators hired West Virginia's well-known and highly respected 2002 Principal of the Year, Harrison County's Phil Brown, as the presentation's narrator. Talley points out that, "We wanted to set up a dynamic in which principals weren't being preached to by bureaucrats or outside advocates, but, rather, were talking to other principals, that is, to someone they could identify with. And who better to narrate this presentation to them than one of their own?"

"We felt that this would also help us address our concern that principals who received the disc would just take a cursory look at it and toss it."

The CD, entitled "Recipe for Success," opened with Principal Brown acknowledging the needs and concerns of principals and administrators around the issues of better nutrition and increased physical activity in schools, and then went on to offer a broad multimedia menu of activity options, recipes and menus, downloadable instructional features, web links, and compelling testimony from other administrators on the value of everything from "Grab and Go Breakfasts" to the increasingly popular concept of "Breakfast After First" (a morning meal following first period, when kids are more likely to eat). Development of this wide-ranging digital resource was just the first step, however.

### **All-Important Training – For and By Principals**

A carefully planned training effort supported what came to be known as West Virginia's "Recipe for Success" project – so-named because of the CD's title.

The West Virginia Team asked strategically selected individuals in districts across the state each to recommend two or more principals who could stand as examples and inspirations for other school leaders – principals who had successfully implemented programs and practices in their schools leading to improved nutrition and increased physical activity. Principals who, in Kathy Talley's words, "had walked the walk."

"We assembled this core group of about 20 West Virginia principals," she recalls, "and brought them together in a workshop, along with an additional field force of individuals we chose specifically because we thought they'd make effective trainers. That force of principals and co-trainers was in turn sent out to conduct a series of workshops and presentations with principals across the state. And once again, the goal was principals talking to principals."

Following workshop training, principals were challenged to present two or more workshops to fellow school leaders somewhere in the state. In recognition of their efforts, they received a \$500 grant from the West Virginia Team to implement in their schools one of the suggested wellness programs and practices featured on the CD.

In a classic train-the-trainer model, this "launch" workshop was intended to educate, inform, inspire, and instruct. Kathy Talley explains.

“First, we walked the participants through an introduction and familiarization period. And when I say walk, I mean that literally – we incorporated the physical activity of a brisk walk to lead off the session, both to facilitate getting to know one another, and to make concrete reference to the notion of physical activity itself. We then sat down in a presentation setting and familiarized the participating principals with the resource itself – that is, the actual contents of the ‘Recipe for Success’ CD. Once this was done, we solicited the principals’ input, asking for reactions and ideas on ways in which, off the top of their heads, these school leaders felt they and others could apply the CD’s principles and practices within their schools. After that, we launched into our actual training session, which was a step-by-step guide to helping principals’ set up and conduct workshops on their own, workshops aimed at fellow school leaders – principals and administrators – within West Virginia.”

What did this training model consist of?

“We simply provided them an outline of how best to present the ‘Recipe for Success’ initiative in the most effective way to an audience of principals,” answers Talley. “How to open the session by announcing that you come bearing a valuable, and necessary resource – and why. How to walk others through the CD resource in a way that explains its ease of use and benefits to all. How to solicit examples of physical activity and overall wellness policies already in place, as a way of engaging audience members and also for the purpose of illustrating for workshop participants how ‘the ball is already rolling,’ and thus provide encouragement. And lastly, and most important, how to reference the link between wellness and academics.”

“When we began doing these workshops,” Talley points out, “it was at the very beginning of No Child Left Behind, so administrators were eager for anything and everything that could boost academic achievement. So in selling wellness initiatives, it made all the sense in the world to focus on the link to academics. It still does.”

Workshop sessions were always ended, Talley says, with presenting principals with application materials for a \$500 grant from the West Virginia Team to implement a program or policy suggested on the “Recipe for Success” CD – everything from purchasing new playground equipment to hosting educational parents’ nights to establishing school walking and jump-rope clubs. Like Rhode Island’s Lunch & Learn sessions, the workshops ended with a request for a commitment, a call to action.

Kathy Talley notes that West Virginia principals were so participatory and all-embracing of the concept that the modest fund of grant monies was soon depleted. Happily, West Virginia’s Department of Health and Human Resources recognized the value of what the West Virginia Team was doing, so they stepped in and contributed an additional \$20,000 – an important and welcome outside validation.

### **One Principal’s Perspective: Spreading the Word**

Phil Dobbins is Principal of the 600-student Clay County High School outside Charleston, West Virginia, and is one of the school leaders involved in the “Recipe for Success” project. From Dobbins’s perspective, the

## THE SELL TO PRINCIPALS

The West Virginia Team's "wellness sell" to principals was an academic one, stressing the relationship of health, physical activity, and nutrition to learning.

### Messages:

- Student health status impacts learning.
- Students who are active and well nourished are less often absent or tardy.
- Students who are active and well nourished have fewer discipline problems.
- Students who are active and well nourished show increased attention.
- Students who are active and well nourished score higher on achievement tests.
- Of direct importance to administrators: student health impacts the school's success in meeting both academic and attendance goals.

*Note: See related sidebar on "The Learning Connection," on page 3.*

initiative was thoroughly worthwhile.

"Our county is very rural, and about 70% of our students receive free- or reduced-price meals," he points out. "Merely by observation, I've been painfully aware of the obesity problem among a depressingly significant number of our students. I have also come face to face with situations that have brought to light how severe the problem is in terms of education of our parents and community at large. If you can believe it, I've actually had angry parents phone me up after I removed a candy-vending machine from the school cafeteria, demanding an explanation of what else on earth their child was supposed to eat! So when Kathy Talley's invitation to a training session for the 'Recipe for Success' program came through, I knew it was for me, and that I should make time for it. And when I learned that it was a situation where I was going to be empowered to share what I'd learned in workshops with other principals locally, I knew I had to start right here in Clay County. And I was pleased to do so."

Dobbins recounts that his experience of the training session was entirely positive.

"I absolutely loved meeting with other principals from all over the state to learn more about just this one issue – sharing experiences, brainstorming solutions, and getting prepped to share the ideas on the CD. The training was professional and comprehensive, and I'd say very motivating. Most important, principals just don't get a chance to 'share' like that in the course of a typical day's work schedule, and we certainly don't get to devote such a luxuriously large amount of time to one topic, even one this important."

"I attended the training session at the Stonewall Resort in Roanoke, West Virginia, along with our school's food services director, and just like the other West Virginia principals there I learned how easy it can be to implement positive steps within a school building that lead to better nutrition and more physical activity...and how important it is to spread the word."

Returning home, Dobbins did just that – spread the word. He drew a circle close to home, and held a "Recipe for Success" workshop for the 6 other school principals from within Clay County; there are a total of 7 schools in the county – one high school, one middle school, and 5 elementary schools.

"I'd say that the ideas and guidance that we got from the 'Recipe for Success' CD have benefited all of us," Dobbins volunteers. "But none more than me."

He elaborates that recent steps he's taken include introduction within his high school of three-point basketball shooting in the gym for daily school-wide exercise; the installation of milk and healthy-choice drink machines onto school premises; the elimination of high-calorie, high-fat snacks like potato chips from the list of vending options; and even encouraging several of his English teachers in their unorthodox policies of beginning each class with a brisk 20-minute walk or aerobics session to "get the students' blood pumping so they can think better."

"I love it when a teacher 'gets it,' like that, and I really applaud it," Dobbins says enthusiastically, echoing the refrain, once again, of academic achievement as the ultimate bottom line goal of virtually every school



leader with whom the subjects of better nutrition and increased physical activity are raised. “If the kids aren’t eating well and moving and breathing,” Dobbins says succinctly, “they’re not thinking. And it’s not going to happen academically. Kids – at least our kids in West Virginia – just can’t afford that.”

### A Simple Formula

Talley claims that, in the end, the success of West Virginia’s “Recipe for Success” project rests in the fact that her Team developed a fairly simple and straightforward formula for talking to principals.

“First,” Talley summarizes, “you’ve got to make your message resonate with principals’ concerns – and in this day and age, that means making reference to test scores and measurable, yearly academic progress. Our ‘sell’ to principals about the value of getting on the school wellness bandwagon was based largely on this academic motivation.”

“Second, you’ve got to make the message simple and the action do-able – hence the carefully planned menu of easily implementable activities and solutions that made up the bulk of our CD content. Nothing on it was complicated or onerous. We kept it simple.”

“And last, it never hurts to provide a tangible reward. The \$500 grants that we gave to principals to implement programs and practices on the CD was a modest, almost token, amount. But it was an incentive. It sweetened the pot just enough. To date, more than 45 West Virginia schools have received grants, and more than 25,000 students have been impacted.”

## Indiana

**In Indiana, Action for Healthy Kids’ Sarah Titzer has learned** that one of the best ways to engage principals and senior school administrators in creating a healthier school environment is to make them work a little bit. Enter the “Healthy Hoosier School Award,” whose lengthy, multi-page application form requires direct, thoughtful, written input and personal signoff from senior school officials as to why their school is deserving of the award.

The Healthy Hoosier School Award recognizes Indiana schools with policies and educational programs in place promoting an environment that creates healthy students and healthy learners. The application requires that applicant-schools evaluate and assess their behavior in the areas of nutrition, physical activity, staff wellness, and numerous other fields.

“In creating the award and developing the application,” says Indiana’s Titzer, “we looked at similar recognition programs and then developed our own questionnaire, which, because it asks for detailed information on everything from school lunch policies to information about on-campus health personnel to whether vending machines are turned on during classroom hours, is becoming as much a statistical information source – almost like a mini census report – as an award application.”

Launched in the 2004-05 school year, the Healthy Hoosier School Award is promoted Indiana-wide by the state’s Department of Education – to all 293 school districts and close to 3,000 Indiana schools. In its first year, 24 schools applied for the award, but that jumped 100% to 48 schools in the second year. As for judging? “We created a rubric of point values for each

## A GOLD-LEVEL HEALTHY HOOSIER SCHOOL

Nora Coleman may not be a principal or superintendent, but she certainly had her school leaders' support in pursuing a Healthy Hoosier Award for her school. The influential, power-walking veteran physical education instructor at the 750-student Parkside Elementary School in Columbus, Indiana is a force to be reckoned with. And her boundless enthusiasm about the award process says a lot about the effectiveness of the Indiana Team in lighting the fire under all levels of key district staff, not just principals.

"The thing about Healthy Hoosier," says Coleman "is that it's a real commitment once you decide to apply. I'd say our school collectively spent a solid week completing the application. And importantly, all the various stakeholders in wellness at Parkside were involved – everybody from our staff fitness committee to our cafeteria workers. It's a huge deal."

"The application itself really makes you take stock of your school's wellness efforts overall. We all end up discussing the pros and cons of what we're doing as we're completing it."

At Parkside, those efforts include everything from monthly mile-runs, rigorous fall and spring fitness tests and personal evaluations, and the keeping of "Run Right" journals, to the distribution and use of pedometers to measure and encourage walking.

"I can't tell you how important it is for a school to be recognized in the form of awards like Healthy Hoosier," Coleman says. "It's not about bragging rights, it's about letting our parents and our community know we're doing the right thing by our kids. We take it really seriously. When Amy Moyer came down from Indianapolis to present it, we could have had just a small group gathered, but we made it an all-school celebration. I wanted the whole school involved."

"At Parkside we're constantly doing everything from family nights at school in which we tackle fitness topics, to regularly sending home special newsletters on the kinds of foods kids should be eating. So when the Healthy Hoosier School Award comes through, it's a gigantic validation that we're accomplishing something. And a big encouragement to do more."

question asked," Titzer explains, "assigning a certain point value to each answer. So the judging is actually very quantitative, and quite objective."

## It's All About Involving Those at the Top

Sarah Titzer echoes Rhode Island's Dorothy Brayley and West Virginia's Kathy Talley in confirming the importance of involving administrators and principals in school wellness discussions and decisions.

"I think of top administrators as sort of the thread that ties everything together," Titzer ventures. "When an administrator or principal is openly in support of healthy initiatives, and he or she makes clear that going forward the initiative is to be considered a critical component of the school environment, people just take it seriously. This lays the groundwork for whatever programs get implemented to actually become a part of the culture of the school, and not just be a passing fancy or an interesting project. Administrator buy-in gives an initiative authority and staying power. It makes it real when everybody feels that the superintendent or principal is on the team, not just watching from on high."

With the Healthy Hoosier School Award application, administrators are definitely part of the team – because they're a crucial part of the application. They must participate. In terms of objective-assessment questions, the application form involves information generally put together by a group that, depending on the school, includes a school nurse or nutritionist, the cafeteria manager, a guidance counselor, and students themselves. But on the more subjective side, not one but three essays are required, one of which must be a considered statement signed by the principal detailing the school's "best practice" programs, and current and planned health and wellness programming – and stating in no uncertain terms why the school is unique and worthy of recognition for its commitment to health and wellness.

"Reading these essays," Sarah Titzer says, "I'm always impressed with how committed administrators are – or want to be – to healthier kids. In spite of all their pressures and commitments, virtually all of the principals seem genuinely committed to 'the whole child,' and 'a healthy climate' in which to learn. It's actually very moving to read them. It really makes you want to recognize them for doing the right thing – or trying to."

## Awards: A Big Deal

Amy Moyer, Chair of the Indiana Action for Healthy Kids Team, thinks that "award" is a magic word with school administrators, a fact that is in no small part responsible for the success of the Healthy Hoosier School Award program.

"I'm constantly struck," Moyer claims, "by how important awards and recognition in general are to senior people in education. It's a very big deal to them to be recognized in front of their peers, for achievements, policies, whatever. So we're careful to have the phrase 'Healthy Hoosier School Award' emblazoned on every announcement we send out each year. Those envelopes are received in the office of every administrator in the state, thanks to the Department of Education, and we know for a fact they get opened; they're almost like Oscar ballots.

"When the awards are announced, the Indiana Team makes a personal

visit to every single school – presenting plaques, hanging banners, alerting the local media – anything to help bring a celebratory air to the award. And it works. We’ve presented Gold, Silver, and Bronze Healthy Hoosier School Awards to principals and administrators who have built whole ceremonies around them, complete with district superintendents in attendance. It’s quite impressive.”

“On a community level especially, it’s important for parents to see that their kids’ schools are making strides in improving the health of the school environment, and for the community at large to be aware that improved nutrition and physical activity equals increased academic scores and better learning – which of course benefits everyone. Also, because of the publicity it has received, a lot of parents are particularly interested in the new federally mandated school wellness initiative and the subject of child obesity in general. Because of that interest, our publicizing of things like the Healthy Hoosier School Award when a local school wins has enormous PR value. Bottom line: our award rewards concrete steps toward creating healthier school environments, and encourages other schools toward similar policies. And because it’s such a visible honor, and comes with ‘bragging rights,’ it really succeeds in bringing principals and other higher-ups into the loop.”

### Healthy Fallout From the Healthy Hoosier School Award

Interestingly, the impact of the Healthy Hoosier School Award is being seen in ways not even envisioned by its Indiana Team members. The Evansville

#### THE ROLE OF SCHOOL LEADERS IN PROMOTING SCHOOL WELLNESS

##### An Action for Healthy Kids Web Forum

“This takes a lot of work, and it takes the type of work that necessitates that you be personally committed.”

##### Paul Vallas

CEO, Philadelphia School District, speaking during an Action for Healthy Kids Web Forum for School Administrators and Policy-makers

Philadelphia School District CEO Paul Vallas’s comment, reinforces why school administrator-focused outreach efforts – such as those led by the Rhode Island, West Virginia, and Indiana Action for Healthy Kids Teams – are vital to gaining top-level buy-in and support for school wellness initiatives.

Vallas and six other school administrators and policy-makers participated in the Action for Healthy Kids web forum in April 2006, which examined the relationship between school leadership and school wellness – from the viewpoint of school leaders who are setting trends in school wellness and school reform. During the forum, school leaders shared their strategies for and key insights about promoting wellness as part of a continuous school improvement strategy.

##### Discussion topics included:

- The link between school wellness and student achievement
- Financial implications adopting strict nutrition guidelines for foods available on campus
- The critical role of community collaboration and a team approach
- Parent and family engagement as a key strategy
- Considering diverse cultural traditions in a school district’s approach to wellness
- Connecting with student interest and buy-in
- Creating a culture of wellness throughout the school community
- The undeniable need for leadership at the top

##### Participating school leaders included:

- **Paul Vallas**  
CEO, School District of Philadelphia
- **Thomas Payzant**  
Superintendent, Boston Public Schools
- **Roel Gonzalez**  
Superintendent, Rio Grande City Consolidated Independent School District, Texas
- **Jill Wynns**  
School Board Commissioner, San Francisco Unified School District
- **Mary Louise Cohen**  
School Board Member, Bay Shore Union Free School District, New York
- **Robert Hagemann**  
Principal, McIntosh Middle School, Sarasota, Florida
- **Gayden Carruth**  
Superintendent in Residence for Wellness, American Association of School Administrators

An archived copy of the Action for Healthy Kids web forum, “The Role of School Wellness in Creating High-Performing Schools,” is available at [www.ActionForHealthyKids.org](http://www.ActionForHealthyKids.org).

school district, for instance, leveraged the granting of a Healthy Hoosier School Award to apply for – and successfully receive – a multimillion-dollar U.S. Department of Education’s Safe and Drug-Free School grant. The federal granting agency viewed the Healthy Hoosier School Award as a key validation of this particular district’s wellness efforts, and cited it as a factor in their decision to make the grant. Another winning Indiana school saw the Healthy Hoosier School Award as a spur to hire a full-time wellness coordinator, using the recognition as encouragement to dramatically expand its already-in-place wellness program substantially enough to warrant a new professional staff member. Indiana companies, including local health-care and insurance companies, have signed on as sponsors of the Healthy Hoosier School Award, covering the cost of banners and plaques with voluntary underwriting.

“The award application itself,” says Indiana’s Amy Moyer, echoing Sarah Titzer’s earlier contention, “is proving useful in all sorts of ways. Because it’s so comprehensive in terms of the information it requests, it’s serving as a valuable assessment tool to help schools, and districts, decide where to make modifications and improvements in their wellness policies. It really provides a detailed snapshot of a given school’s wellness profile. At the moment, we’re in the process of entering all of the application information from the first two years into a database, so we’ll have this extensive archive of which schools are doing what, who’s implementing which wellness policies, what guidelines they’re using, etc. It’s going to be incredibly useful for us on a state level, for planning and assessment purposes, but frankly I see no reason why this information wouldn’t be equally useful to those outside our state.” Indiana’s Healthy Hoosier School Award application is available on the Indiana Action for Healthy Kids Team website as a downloadable PDF. Visit [www.nifs.org/afhk/inafhk.htm](http://www.nifs.org/afhk/inafhk.htm).



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how to join a Team, visit  
[www.ActionForHealthyKids.org](http://www.ActionForHealthyKids.org)

#### ABOUT ACTION FOR HEALTHY KIDS

Action for Healthy Kids is a national, non-profit organization addressing the epidemic of overweight, undernourished and sedentary youth by focusing on changes at school. Action for Healthy Kids is a public-private partnership of more than 50 national organizations and government agencies representing education, health, fitness and nutrition, which support and accelerate the efforts of 51 Action for Healthy Kids Teams (including all states and the District of Columbia) made up of thousands of volunteers.

Former U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher is the founding chair of Action For Healthy Kids, which was launched at the 2002 Healthy School Summit in Washington, D.C. Action For Healthy Kids was created in response to *The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity*, which identified the school environment as one of five key sites of change.